Record Restoration in Virginia

(Note for Chapman Collection)

ISLE OF WIGHT LIBRARY
SMITHFIELD BRANCH

RECORD RESTORATION IN VIRGINIA.

I have been unable to learn definitely how long the present method of restoration and preservation of old papers and documents has been in use. I have been told it originated in the Vatican, and from another source comes the claim it was first started in the Huntington Museum in California.

The major part of the restoration that has been done on the Virginia records is the work of the Emory Record Preservation Company of Taunton, Mass. This has been of the highest type and worthy of great praise. Some has also been done in the State through the Library of Congress. We are most fortunate now to have a Virginian, Mr. W. J. Barrow trained to do this restoration, with an office in the State Library in Richmond. Our priceless records will no longer have to be sent out of the State to be restored, and we will have the satisfaction of knowing they are reverently handled, for he loves and appreciates these old volumes, because he is a Virginian. Doubtless you saw in the Times-Dispatch several weeks ago the article on his work and how he happened to enter this field of craftsmanship. (Description of method and exhibition of book).

Several claims are made for priority in introducing this method of restoration into the State. In Dr. McIlwaine's report to the State Library Board in 1924, he stated that he had used his entire appropriation made that year for binding, upon the restoration of twenty-one volumes of the Northumberland County records. The same report carries the statement that the "Daughters of 1812" had restored a book of Hanover County, and the "Daughters of the American Colonists" books in York and Charles City Counties. The name of Mrs. Benjamin L. Purcell is often mentioned as a pioneer in this movement. We also know a book was restored at least twenty years ago in Norfolk County using the present method.

Despite the great loss suffered by our records through war, pillage, fire and deterioration, Virginia is still richer than any other commonwealth in original source material for historians and genealogists, according to Dr. H.R. McIlwaine, the State Librarian of Virginia. This has largely been due to the quality of the paper used in the old books. From County records we glean the knowledge that these old record books were imported from England. Several of them in Isle of Wight County have the watermark of the fleur-de-lis, perhaps indicating that some were obtained from France. The absolute dearth of paper in the colonies during the Revolution, as proven by the orders of the army preserved in the Archives, which are written upon every conceivable kind and scrap of paper, in some instances playing card even being used, would indicate that they depended entirely upon the "Old Country" for their supply of paper. Many of these books are doubtless among the finest examples of the craftmanship of England's best bookbinders, a number being bound in vellum and others in hand-tooled leather. The finest examples I have seen are to be found in the records of Surry and Middlesex Counties.

Often the County Clerks were real artists with their quil ls, and in many instances the penmanship displayed is truly beautiful, legibility frequently being sacrificed to beauty, for the combination literally has to be deciphered. In studying the records in various counties one realizes the chirography in many of them during a given period is by the same writer, thus indicating that

a traveling scribe recorded the records for the clerk, whose qualifications for his office did not include excellency in his penmanship.

Realizing, that the historian and researcher of three hundred years hence, will be just as anxious for the records of thday as we are for the lost, stolen or burned records of the past, it is our duty to secure for posterity a greater degree of permaneney in our records. The State Library Board has been working to to secure legislation which would prohibit the use of other than approved inks, paper and typewriter ribbons for recording public records, including vital statistics. The importance of this legislation is proven to us in every courthouse in the State, for the records recorded in the years 1812-14 are daily growing so dim in many instances one is unable to read them. Unless some chemical is known to bring back the ink with which these books were written, it is time someone was bestirring themselves to see that they are rerecorded, as they will be as irreplacable in a few years as the books crumbling to peices from age and neglect.

The growth and expansion of this Society and all Societies based upon proof of lineage and service are absolutely dependent upon these old records. There is no other source of proof. You, who have recently made out a supplemental for the Daughters of the American Revolution, or an application for some one else, realize the difference in the stringency of the requirements of proof, in just the span of a few years. In many instances the record a mother used for admission is now unacceptable for the daughter. Absolute proof should be required for all genealogical claims, and if your proof has crumbled to dust, what can you do? Bestir yourself and at least save the fragments proving another line.of descent.

It was recommended at the Board meeting held in May that the State Organization expend at least $500.00 on the restoration of records in 1932; because of the rapid disentergration taking place in our Virginia County records, due to the use imposed upon them, by researchers from all over the United States, as a result of the "genealogical boom"-as it has been so aptly expressed- which is sweeping the country. It daily seems to be growing in intensity rather than subsiding, and the seriousness of the situation is facing Virginia and all people of Virginia descent.

At the 37th Annual Conference held in Wytheville in October, a resolution was offered by Mrs. L.L.Chapman, State Librarian and seconded by Mrs.F. B. Kegley, State Historian and Mrs P. W. Hiden; that this Organization make record restoration one of its chief aims and objectives, and it was unanimously passed.

Mr Keesee appointed as the committee to dispense the fund raised as the result of the above recommendation and resolution, Mrs. L.L.Chapman, Chairman, Mrs. P. W. Hiden, Regent of the Newport News Chapter and Mrs J. C. Pollard of the William Byrd Chapter.

The first work undertaken by the Committee was the restoration of the First Will and Deed Book of Goochland County, covering the period 1728-34. This volume has been restored in honor of our State-Regent, Mrs. Keesee, since it was under her Regeme the restoration of records was undertaken as a State work. This book has been completed and returned to Goochland County. The First Will Book of Halifax County will be the next project of the State Organization. The book is small, but in a pitiable condition.

A number of Chapters have reported to the committee work already accomplished for the year 1932: the Fort Nelson Chapter a book in Norfolk County, the Newport News Chapter a book in Middlesex County and the Col. William Allen Chapter the first Will Book of Sussex County. Several are considering Restora-

as their Chapter project for this Winter's work. The William Byrd Chapter will restore a Revolutionary Army Order Book; Fort Nelson another book in Norfolk; Newport News Chapter a book from Goochland; the Commonwealth Chapter the second Will and Deed Book in Goochland; the Col Wm. Allen restoration work in Surry and the Martinsville Chapters work needed in Henry County. The Committee is optimistic enough to believe other books will soon be reported, for we are positive the Chapters are beginning to realize that the restoration of these valuable treasures of our past, is a patriotic duty which cannot be deferred.

Restoration, I know of personally in the State, which is imperative,- the first will book of Brunswick County, the first order book of Sussex, first will book of Mecklenburg County, several volumes in Isle of Wight, several in Southampton, two volumes in Henry County, etc.

The press has been most helpful in the State recently in giving publicity to the work of the restoration of records. However I cannot quite agree with the editorial of the Times Dispatch when the statement was made , that this work lacks picturesqueness, for the restoration of these old volumes unfolds a picture of our past teeming with color, romance and adventure of Cavalier, Puritan, Pirate, Huguenot, Quaker, Indian, and the"Dove" Maiden. With these elements how could a person with any sense of imagination fail to find this work picturesque and with an appeal to both his imaginative and his practical self.